Footprints of Fanon in Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers and Sembene Ousmane’s Xala

Haidar Eid and Khaled Ghazel

This article offers an analysis of two important films – Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers and Sembene Ousmane’s Xala – within the context of postcolonial theories. While its focus will be, in the main, on the postcolonial as a historical framework, the essay attempts to transcend this framework through its engagement with the postcolonial as an awareness of identity, conflict and challenge on personal, communal and national levels. The issues broached range from colonialism, decolonisation, neocolonialism, and violence to Fanonism, mimicry and the neo-bourgeoisie. In the course of this analysis, recourse is made to the Third Cinema,¹ as it “anticipates and touches borders with postcolonial theory” (Wayne 2001, 22), and its master concept of decolonisation. While the article inaugurates the debate with individual close examinations of The Battle of Algiers and Xala, the discussion will be complemented by stringing the two films together on threads that bind them as two “great cinematic documents of the age of empire” (Said 2001, 291).

***

The Battle of Algiers: A Fanonian Representation of Violence

[...]he Algerian revolution introduces a new style into the struggle for liberation ... the form given to the struggle of the African people is such, in its violence and in its total character, that it will have a decisive influence on ... future struggles.

(Fanon 1988, 104)

English in Africa 35 No. 2 (October 2008): 151-161
The Battle of Algiers chronicles a painful episode in the Algerian war of independence. Loosely based on Saadi Yacef’s memoir Souvenirs de la Bataille d’Algier, the film pieces together the main events in late 1960s colonial Algiers, starting with the organisation of the revolutionary cells in the Casbah. From there, the film portrays the widening hostilities between native Algerians and the pieds noirs and the ensuing introduction of French paratroopers (hereafter paras) to uproot the Front de Libération Nationale (hereafter FLN). The paras’ victory in the battle is delineated through the neutralization of the FLN leadership after a bitter campaign of assassinations and captures. The film closes with a coda, depicting Algerians demonstrating for independence, which is suggestive of the French momentarily triumphing in the battle of Algiers but ultimately losing the Algerian War.

An appropriate way of addressing The Battle of Algiers might start with approaching the trope of anti-colonial violence as “a phase of a dialectic historical process that will lead to national liberation” (Svirastava 2005, 102). Among the most significant issues represented in Pontecorvo’s film is the emphasis on women’s will to be full participants in the Revolution. In one of the most enthralling sequences of the film, the three women characters, Zohra, Hassiba and Halima are taking off their veils, tinting their hair and putting on their bright, summery dresses prior to planting the three bombs in the heart of the European Quarter of Algiers. For the purpose of evincing the agency of these women executing an act that may seem to them so ignominious, the film locates the viewer within the space where the women are readying themselves to blend into the European city. As Lindsey Moore argues, “the use of the bird’s eye view and close-ups obviously indicates the ability of the film to orchestrate in Mary Ann Doane’s words, ‘a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression’” (2003, 67). Thus, the film compels the viewer to breach the privacy of the changing room and to be complicit in a voyeuristic relation to these women (Moore 2003, 67-69).

As Joan Mellon comments, the sequence is replete with close-ups on the women’s faces “at those moments when [they] experience a change of consciousness” (1973, 39). One may cite the scene where one of the women hesitates before cutting off her braids to look more European. No less pertinent is the episode of Zohra suffering a moment of revulsion (at the sight of the young faces sipping their milk shakes) before steeling herself by recalling Yacef’s account of the Rue de Thèbes. Pontecorvo uses sound brilliantly throughout The Battle of Algiers. To highlight the bloody drama inherent in the sequence, the director has recourse to indigenous Algerian drum-beat on the soundtrack which affirms an interconnection between the women’s activity and the revolutionary cause and replaces the original
FOOTPRINTS OF FANON

153
dialogue with the dramatic effect of what Pontecorvo describes as “a
heartbeat, like a liturgy of war” (1967, 267).

The scene also refers to mimicry as “a source of anti-colonial resistance
and an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of . . .
colonialism” (McLeod 2000, 55). As the sequence elucidates, the three
women, in temporarily adopting the coloniser’s cultural habits and values
through masquerading as Europeans, turn their act of mimicry into a means
of locating a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance. How else could
the trio evade detection at the ubiquitous checkpoints of the Casbah to stage
their reprisal bombings than by outwitting the coloniser with what Fanon
terms as a “technique of camouflage” (1965, 46)? Consonant with the
aforementioned sequence is Fanon’s conception of the young Algerian
women carrying the struggle to the heart of the metropolis. Although yet
unused to this unveiled body, argues Fanon, the Algerian woman in the
metropolis “must overcome all timidity, all awkwardness (for she must pass
for a European), and at the same time be careful not to overdo it, not to
attract notice to herself” (1965, 59). In this respect, it is pertinent to note that
in ultraconservative, patriarchal societies, it is only in times of crisis that
women have some unmediated say of their own. In times of anti-colonial
struggle, they may be presented as supplementary to the heroic male, but
they can retrieve a voice of their own nevertheless, as in the Algerian war of
independence, when the veil, becomes a symbol of rebellion.

Whereas the veil has a highly erotic significance in colonial films, in The
Battle of Algiers it is utterly political. Taking into consideration the factual
and pathological side of the politics of resistance against the French, Fanon
notices that the veil becomes one of the many codes of resistance to the
coloniser, an attitude that applies to every human act against forms of
repression. “The colonized,” he writes, “in the face of the emphasis given by
the colonialist to this or that aspect of his traditions, reacts violently” (1965,
47). In a telling scene, a veiled gun-bearer rises up to a soldier who attempts
to lift her face-veil while crossing one of the French barricades. The soldier
is instantly reprimanded by one of his colleagues: “you should never touch
their women.” By donning the veil, the Algerian woman is creating a
situation of non-reciprocity. It is through her that the dominated society in its
entirety is symbolically refusing to establish any reciprocal relations. In this
way, it becomes evident why all attempts at assimilation have taken the
discarding of the veil to be their foremost target. In a subsequent scene, as
the camera focuses upon the crossing of the unveiled blonde woman
(modelled on the legendary Zohra Drif) with a group of veiled women,
‘Algerian woman’ becomes the perfect epitome of cultural and political
impenetrability. As Moore notes, “The European masquerade brings about similar concern to that provoked by veiled women: both are impenetrable and conceal something” (2003, 66).

Foremost among the key Fanonian motifs in *The Battle of Algiers* is the permeating role of violence within the colonial structure. It follows, therefore, that some of the most prominent violence-related sequences are imbued with a Fanonian spirit. There is an illuminating moment in the film when Ali la Pointe, still a street urchin, is intentionally tripped by a young *pied noir* in the course of a police chase. Instead of attempting to abscond, Ali rises to his feet and punches the man on the mouth before being manhandled to prison. The scene resonates with Fanon’s conception of anti-colonial violence, once properly directed, as psychologically liberating for the colonised; that is, it liberates the colonised from despondency and passivity. In an oft-quoted passage, Fanon makes plain that “[a]t the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (1963, 94).

An equally vital implication of the sequence needs to be noted. As Ali la Pointe is being taken to prison, his résumé is heard in the voice-over depicting him as a petty criminal and an uneducated hoodlum. Analogously, the para Colonel Mathieu is first introduced with the same type of voice-over; his record, by contrast, accentuates his previous military victories. What makes the two characters dissimilar, however, is the way they interact with and within the space of the film. The viewer’s first encounter with Colonel Mathieu occurs as he leads his troops into the heart of Algiers. Parading triumphantly ahead of the troops and within a distance from the people lining the street, Mathieu is kept distant from the viewer. In contradistinction to Mathieu, Ali la Pointe always seems identified closely with the space of the city and its dwellers. This is evidently the case when Ali is first introduced in the film operating a Three Card Monty game on the pavement before his imprisonment. The incarceration sequence invites commentary in terms of Ali la Pointe’s radicalization. Ironically enough, it is during his two-year sentence in Barbarousse Prison that Ali, like Malcolm X, is politically baptised. In *The Battle of Algiers*, in contrast to *Pépé le Moko*, where the Algerian inside a French space does not aspire to assert his own power, this colonial space is essential for the creation of Ali’s political agency. Ali is shown locked up with his prison mates as an Algerian resistance fighter shouts “Long live Algeria” while being marched off to the guillotine. The camera cuts back to Ali who now seems visibly invigorated. He jumps to a barred window overlooking the yard where the nationalist is
being led to be decapitated. The shot does not return to a close-up on Ali’s eyes, but to the prison wall marked by tiny slits of windows. This suggests that it is probable that many other men like Ali will become politically aware of the violent repercussions of the colonization of their country. With the fall of the guillotine, the sound-track pipes with a melancholic solo flute and the camera cuts to a close-up on Ali’s face. The entire prison space now seems to collapse into his resolute expression.

Nevertheless, should one consider the political evolution of Ali la Pointe as among the key objectives of this sequence, then The Battle of Algiers “fails to offer an adequately complex engagement” (Wayne 2001, 16) with that process. Throughout the sequence, we discern no communicational intercourse between Ali and the other political detainees. Straight after the guillotining of the nationalist, we see Ali taking orders directly from Djafar, the head of the FLN in Algiers. But, as Mike Wayne argues, with the understatement of the process of Ali’s politicisation, The Battle of Algiers fails in its treatment of one of the principal areas of concern of Third Cinema (2001, 16). This forms a point of entry into some important criticism of the film as a whole.

Notwithstanding Edward Said’s praise for Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers (1966) and Burn! (1969) as the “two greatest political films ever made” (2000, 283), it is necessary to point out some serious shortcomings of Battle. Besides its evasion of gender issues and failure to record the importance of the “class difference within the liberation struggle” (Wayne 2001, 21), The Battle of Algiers also downplays the struggle in the countryside. As the focus was conclusively on the FLN, the film regrettably overlooks the historic role played by the largest nationalist movement in Algeria, the Mouvement National Algérien, led by Messali Hadj, which, in fact, preceded the FLN. It also ought to be noted that, even with regards to the FLN, the film, with the single exception of a brief mention of Jean Paul Sartre, takes no account of the ideological ties between the FLN and the French left. To this end, it is noteworthy that Pontecorvo did not include in The Battle of Algiers the important support provided for the Algerian national movement by its immediate neighbours as well as Egypt’s Nasser. Citing these imperfections, however, should not obscure The Battle of Algiers’ achievement as one of the most remarkable political films of all time.

***
Xala: Pitfalls of African Consciousness

[We] have to see, feel, and understand ourselves through the mirror of film. For us, African filmmakers, it was then necessary to become political, to become involved in a struggle against all the ills of man’s cupidity, envy, individualism, the nouveau riche mentality, and all the things we have inherited from the colonial and neo-colonial systems.

(Ousmane Sembene, qtd. in Pfaff 1984, 11)

If The Battle of Algiers depicts a struggle for independence, Ousmane Sembene’s satirical film Xala focuses on post-independence struggles. The film draws on a very different strain within Fanon’s writing: his scathing critique of the indigenous neo-bourgeoisie, what he refers to as “the pitfalls of national consciousness” (1963, 119). The film hinges on a fable of impotence, in which the protagonist’s xala, a divinely sanctioned curse of impotence, epitomises the neo-colonial subjugation of the black African elite. The protagonist, El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, is a polygamous Senegalese businessman who becomes plagued with xala on his wedding night with his third wife. Searching for a panacea, El Hadji visits multifarious marabouts, (Senegalese traditional healers), who attempt in vain to cure him. Simultaneously, he suffers setbacks in his business and ends up being expelled from the now Senegalese-controlled Chamber of Commerce after being accused of embezzlement. Eventually, he finds out that his xala has resulted from a curse inflicted on him by a Dakar beggar whose land El Hadji had expropriated. He finally recovers by subjecting himself to the beggars’ demands that he strip and be spat upon. The film closes with a freeze frame of his spittle-covered body.

Shortly after the opening of the film, French statuaries are unceremoniously removed from the Chamber of Commerce. But the realities of postcolonial politics are far behind. The white men, while reclaiming the statuaries and taking their leave, immediately return to deliver to the new black government ministers briefcases full of cash. The allegory here implicit becomes conspicuous with the equation of the council president and the president of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, whose picture we now see hung on one of the Chamber’s walls. The viewer has therefore been alerted to read the subsequent sequences of the film in an allegorical fashion.

It needs no great stretch of the imagination to see that El Hadji’s three wives in Sembene’s Xala are “equated with Africa at different periods of its evolution” (Pfaff 1984, 155). El Hadji’s eldest wife, Awa Adja, symbolizes the traditional Islamic phase of Senegalese history. According to Francoise
Pfaff, "Awa truly appears as the embodiment of African traditions even if her environment is no longer truly traditional" (1982, 27). Besides her dramatization of how traditional ways are ill-adapted to the exigencies of post-colonial Senegal, her philosophy is delineated through her most incisive comment in the film: "If patience could kill, I'd have been dead long ago." Through the character of Awa, Sembene, like Cabral and Fanon, seems to suggest to the viewer the delusional nature of the retreat to Africanness.

In Xala, the contrast between Awa and El Hadji's second wife, Oumi, is discerned during one of the scenes of the third wedding where the two sit together. With close-ups on both women, Sembene conveys the further breakdown of traditional customs and the encroachments of Western consumerism into the post-independence Senegalese society. Oumi wears European clothes, a wig, make-up and dark glasses. Throughout the film, Oumi's treatment of her husband is abusive and despotic. Their marriage, which revolves around the exchange of money and services, forms a critique of economic and social relations under colonialism and neo-colonialism. Sembene asserts this vision through his characterisation of N’Gone, El Hadji's third wife, whose "role in the film . . . is little more than a femme objet" (Pfaff 1984, 153). Reduced to a mere fetishistic object rather than a person, N’Gone is a peripheral figure in the film. During the wedding celebration, she is suggestively likened to the white figure of a bride on the lavish wedding decoration inspected closely and disdainfully by Oumi. N’Gone is also identified through her photograph on the wall, which is seen while she is being undressed with her back to the camera as her mother lectures her on the importance of being obedient to her husband. The two photographs of her, clothed and unclothed, are more discernible to the viewer than N’Gone herself. Eventually, she is downgraded to the clothing on the broom stick which appears again in the final scenes of the film depicting El Hadji’s ignominy. In sum, Sembene presents N’Gone as the upshot of a neo-colonial society: a fetish with no identity, no voice, no language: a symbol of the ramifications of cultural impotence. In Xala, she is the perfect antithesis to El Hadji’s daughter Rama.

Rama's function in the film is vital. Sembene visually accentuates her freedom as a character by "presenting her alone in many more shots than the other female characters" (Pfaff 1984, 155). She ardently supports the Wolof language as a mark of her identification with the struggle for independence from European culture. When she pays a visit to her father in his office, Sembene intentionally places her before a map of Senegal: Rama’s costume visibly reproduces the colours of the Senegalese flag. It is especially noteworthy that El Hadji later follows in the footsteps of Rama as regards
the use of Wolof in his verbal battle with the other ministers. El Hadji asks their permission to give his final speech before the chamber in Wolof but is denied it in much the same way as he previously reprimanded Rama for addressing him in Wolof. He is told instead to voice his remarks in French: the colonial language and, significantly, the newly-adopted language of the Senegalese neo-bourgeoisie.

In Xala, El Hadji becomes a symbolic incarnation of the African nouveaux riche. His wealth, however, is tenuous. It is that of the national bourgeoisie, whose ostensible power is reliant on its ability to trade with former colonial ‘metropoles,’ the dictates of which he has to endure. Fanon scornfully acknowledges the superficiality of such a bourgeoisie along with its precarious status: “The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace” (1963, 149). Xala is very much a critique of the phenomena of post-independence ‘kleptocracy’ and its repercussions for every aspect of post-colonial Senegalese society. Thus, from its inception, the film draws a dividing line between the two main classes in Senegal (which works in the film as a microcosm of Africa itself): the neo-bourgeois, incorporating the exploitative ruling class who share money stolen from the government treasury, and the oppressed subject class who, after dancing in the celebrations of independence, soon discover that the cycle of delusion, ostracism and despondency goes on unabated. The new bourgeoisie “presents a much more insidious and sinister force than the openly exploitative European colonialists” (Gabriel 1979, 170).

The importance of contrast for an understanding of Sembene’s film as a whole can hardly be overestimated. In Xala, the water images contrast the superfluous affluence of the bourgeoisie with the abject destitution of the beggars. At the time when there is drought in Senegal and the population is starving, El Hadji indulges in nourishing his imported car and himself with imported mineral water. Sembene also yokes the fetishism of the imported goods to El Hadji’s sexuality: though El Hadji disdains the traditional idea of sitting on the mortar with the pestle between his legs on his wedding night, he is presented as riding across the countryside with a bottle of mineral water between his legs on the way to the first marabout.

The car itself indicates the polarisation of Senegal’s postcolonial society. The chauffeur-driven cars of the ministers proceeding in a cortège to El Hadji’s wedding ceremony together with the blue wedding present for N’Gone, which is never seen used in the film, are obvious synecdoches for
the colonial culture incarnated in consumer goods: the epitome of what Sembene calls "technical fetishism" (Murphy 2000, 122). As it is apparent throughout the film, the car turns out to be a perfect symbol of African capitalism representing not only the power that resides in the accumulation of wealth, but also the subjection of the masses. In Xala, a car is neither easily obtainable nor even useful. When the officer comes to take El Hadji's Mercedes, for instance, none of his assistants knows how to drive it away.

In Sembene's vision of the disparities inherent in post-colonial Senegal, the beggars are "important to the film's social analysis" (Turvey 1985, 86). The beggars are Sembene's instrument for evoking the history of the material exploitation of the countryside and of the urban poor. They provide the viewer with some of the most vivid images in the film, especially those whose crippled limbs reduce them to creeping about. In contrast to the superfluity of cars owned by the ministers, this is the only means of moving around available to them. The scene in which the beggars are rounded up is central to the drama of El Hadji. Part of this scene's significance lies in the fact that the distributor of the Wolof language newspaper is carted away with the beggars. By this Sembene equates the city and the country poor. When the beggars return to the city, the newspaper man is still with them, as is the case in the final scene when they achieve their victory over El Hadji. The enactment of their final ritual comments on the form of the film, which can be seen as an attempt at purification. Thus, the beggars turn out to be the satirists: they, not the marabouts, are the real medical men. Sembene is intent on implying that all who are dispossessed can aspire to this power, as can those who are able to renounce their fondness for accumulating wealth.

By way of conclusion, it is possible to say that Xala is a high-spirited assault on the postcolonial elite. From its opening sequence, which has been mythicised into an unforgettable set-piece of the post-independence 'transfer of power,' the film brilliantly examines the paradoxes which colour an African world emerging from a history of French colonial rule. The post-independence weaknesses of the Senegalese economic structures are mirrored by Sembene's depiction of the social world - especially the relationship between men and women. Sembene's immediate concern in Xala is with the problems created for the Africans with the advent of political independence in the twentieth century, in particular with cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism, as he sees it, encourages false aspirations in the form of consumer capitalism, the continuing inequality of caste and class, and profound divisions between town and country, rich and poor and foreign and indigenous cultures. Moreover, the imposition by the new ruling class of French as an official language rather than Wolof questions the
authenticity of the country’s independence. Xala’s success derives largely from the fact that it has scathingly revealed the true nature of the political independence of many African states. It is no surprise that it is hailed as “a magnificent critique of the neo-colonial structures that have sprouted from the ruins of colonialism” (Gupta, qtd. in Pfaff 1988, 252).

Conclusion

It ought to be clear by now that, as two films deeply indebted to Fanon, The Battle of Algiers and Xala have incorporated some of the more radical elements in his political philosophy to portray the Franco-African conflict and its ensuing repercussions. In their scathing critique of colonialism, neo-colonialism and the capitalist system with its bourgeois values, both movies touch on the major areas of the Fanonian concern of Third Cinema. With the two films, the viewer is given a clear insight into Africa’s plight because of the Western colonial project and the neo-colonial aspirations of the post-independence rulers. At a time when the quest for domination and hegemony still goes on unabated, The Battle of Algiers and Xala prove to be as relevant to African politics as ever they were. It would be naïve not to see in Algiers a besieged Baghdad or in Colonel Mathieu a modern day American war general. With The Battle of Algiers and Xala, we are given a front row seat to history.

NOTES

1. “Third Cinema” is a term coined by Fernando Solanas and Ocatvi Getino in the late 1960’s. In their article, entitled “Towards a Third Cinema” (1969), they classify cinema into three categories. Unlike “The First Cinema,” which is the Hollywood production model that promulgates bourgeois values to a passive audience through escapist spectacle and individual characters and the “Second Cinema,” that is the European art film, which is centred on the individual expression of the auteur director, “Third Cinema” appeals to the audience by presenting the truth and inspiring aggressive activity. In “Third Cinema,” traditional exhibition models are usually avoided: the films should be screened clandestinely, both in order to avoid censorship and commercial networks, and so that the viewer must take a risk to see them. More importantly for our discussion, the form decries both neo-colonialism and capitalism. See their article “Towards a Third Cinema” in InterActivist <http://info.interactivist.net/node/4669>.
WORKS CITED


FILMOGRAPHY
